

URBAN SPARK

Through the collaborative work of the Near West Side Initiative, a once-neglected Syracuse neighborhood is being revitalized to fulfill the vision of residents

BY DAVID MARC



URBAN-DWELLERS AND THOSE WHO WANT TO JOIN THEM HAVE

wondered for decades if an American city can rise outside the all-too-familiar boundaries of unsustainable sprawl and my-way-or-the-highway urban planning. While a decisive answer remains elusive, the people who live and work on Syracuse's Near West Side are making remarkable progress in shaping a sustainable human-scale metropolis in a neighborhood that not very long ago appeared to be a victim of terminal lack of imagination. Residents, entrepreneurs, artists, and builders, mobilized by a University-led partnership of public- and private-sector stakeholders, are renewing the viability and vitality of one of the city's oldest neighborhoods. Access to innovation—microloans for start-up businesses, mortgages appropriate for property and buyer, the latest in green technology for home renovation—is attracting artists, musicians, and craftspeople who are turning empty warehouses into living and work space and infusing new character into the area. The Near West Side, or SALT District (Syracuse Arts, Literacy, and Technology) as it is also known, is taking on buzz.



Near West Side resident Tywana “Mother Earth” James celebrates with children at last year’s Near West Side Block Party, which welcomed more than 800 residents.

The three winning designs in the “From the Ground Up: Innovative Green Homes” competition represent advanced thinking about design, sustainability, and cost-effective building practices. Two of the single-family homes, known as R-House and TED (below left and center), neighbor each other on Otisco Street. The third, Live Work Home (below right), is several blocks away on Marcellus Street. It was designed by a team led by School of Architecture alum Rick Cook '83.





Chancellor Nancy Cantor joins the fun at last year's Near West Side Block Party, which celebrated the NWSI's work and news that WCNY and ProLiteracy International were moving to the neighborhood.

QUICK FACTS

» The Near West Side Initiative is a University-led partnership that has brought in millions of dollars of government and foundation grants, facilitating projects designed to reinvigorate the housing stock and business economy of Syracuse's Near West Side.

» The initiative has attracted a new generation of artists, artisans, entrepreneurs, and residents who have discovered abundant, affordable live-in work space in the neighborhood.

» The initiative provides SU faculty and students with opportunities to put classroom theory into practice through a range of projects involving architecture, the arts, green technologies, and other areas of study.

Marc: Urban Spark

Since the launch of the Near West Side Initiative Inc. (NWSI) less than five years ago, more than 30 new or rehabilitated residences have drawn buyers ranging from lifelong apartment-renters to suburban empty-nesters. Factory buildings that haven't been on the tax rolls since the Orange played football under the open sky at Archbold Stadium have been transformed into mixed-use developments, featuring offices, shops, and loft apartments. Skiddy Park is sporting new basketball courts and local artists have spruced up the fences surrounding the baseball diamond with colorful designs. A second city park, Lipe Art Park, is taking shape on a reclaimed brown field. Long-standing businesses, such as Nojaim Brothers Supermarket and the Welcome Inn (a Ukrainian restaurant and charcuterie), have been joined by new shops, many of them run by resident artisans. Companies and organizations have moved into spacious affordable offices, with several big ribbon-cuttings in the offing.

"Since we started in 2007, close to \$70 million worth of public and private development has been generated in the Near West Side," says Marilyn Higgins, vice president of SU's Community Engagement and Economic Development office and president of the NWSI board of directors. "That's probably more than was invested in the neighborhood during the previous 60 years." NWSI director Maarten Jacobs points to an aspect of the achievement that is more difficult to quantify. "Resident engagement and resident leadership are part of all we do," he says. "This is not a case of large institutions and their partners coming into a neighborhood, building some houses, rehabbing commercial space, and then calling it a day. We are engaging the members of this community so they can revitalize it in accordance with *their* vision of what it should be."

Settled before the Civil War, the Near West Side consists of about a square mile just west of downtown Syracuse. At its peak of development, roughly 1880-1930, the eastern part of the neighborhood boasted spacious homes, public gardens, and elegant churches, but was also home to a considerable working-class and immigrant population that found jobs at the district's western edge, a hub of industrial activity. Among the landmark inventions created there were the Biograph camera (1897), favored by director D.W. Griffith and other masters of the silent screen, and the air-cooled combustion engine (1901) for the Franklin automobile, built for more than 30 years in a factory on the current site of Fowler High School. The automobile, which helped the Near West

Side prosper, became the source of its undoing after World War II, as longtime residents and businesses headed for the suburbs, the Sunbelt, and beyond. The world seemed to have passed the old neighborhood by.

A PLACE TO LIVE

During a period of unprecedented turmoil in American home finance—and widespread retrenchment in homebuilding—the NWSI has found an invaluable partner in Home HeadQuarters Inc. of Syracuse and Central New York (HHQ), a nonprofit organization providing mortgages and rehabilitation loans for owner-occupied residences. "We do three things, all of them beneficial to people who want to own or improve their homes on the Near West Side," says Kerry Quaglia, executive director of HHQ (*homehq.org*), which was founded in 1996. "First, we're a lender, and because we are certified by the U.S. Treasury as a community development financial institution, we can be a magnet for getting credit from banks and credit unions, which we then flow into the neighborhood. Second, we do property redevelopment, taking vacant properties, such as tax-delinquent houses, and getting them renovated and into the hands of owners. Third, we provide education and counseling." For instance, HHQ's Home Ownership Center offers classes on rights and responsibilities of home owners, preventing foreclosure, and other subjects, drawing attendance from all over Central New York.

According to Quaglia, collaboration with NWSI partners has helped HHQ improve its ability to serve the needs of moderate-income home owners, especially in the area of achieving affordable energy costs through green innovations. "We've always built homes that meet federal 'Energy Star' guidelines," Quaglia says. "But the connections we made on the Near West Side enabled us to build our first LEED-certified homes." LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is a tougher set of standards established by the U.S. Green Building Council, covering every aspect of construction, from innovative use of recycled materials to the latest developments in heating and cooling.

The NWSI's commitment to making sustainability a cornerstone of neighborhood construction was made plain in one of its first high-profile efforts, "From the Ground Up," a design competition for new single-family homes specifically intended to meet local needs. HHQ partnered with the SU School of



Architecture and the Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems (Syracuse CoE) to co-sponsor the competition, which drew 57 submissions, many of them from architects and firms at the leading edge of green technologies. "The finalists demonstrated remarkable skill in addressing this challenging project, yielding a wide range of approaches," said architecture dean Mark Robbins G'82. "It is hoped that these houses will create new models for sustainability and innovation within limited budgets." All three winning designs for homes were built—and sold.

Ed Bogucz, executive director of the Syracuse CoE, was impressed by the waste-not-want-not techniques proposed for new homes and was determined to adapt as many of them as possible as choices for existing homeowners, saddled with high utility bills due to antiquated equipment. "The first thing we did was join a program that gave grants to residents to conduct energy audits," he says. "This allowed us to gather the kind of data needed to give the best possible advice." Dozens of residents were helped, but Bogucz points to a particular instance that exempli-

fies the NWSI at its best: bringing new-tech solutions to the real problems of everyday people. "I had my eye on integrated systems that produce both electricity and heat as a strategy for energy efficiency," Bogucz says. "Up to this point, these systems were intended for commercial or institutional use. But a new product, just coming to market, seemed like a workable system for a house on Marcellus Street in desperate need of a new furnace." The system Bogucz chose consists of an engine that burns natural gas to drive an electric generator and, in the process, produces an exhaust capable of heating a hot-air furnace. With the homeowner's permission, the Syracuse CoE bought and installed the system as a demonstration project, allowing the center to study its performance under real-life conditions. "It was a pretty good deal all the way around," Bogucz says.

The housing action on the Near West Side isn't confined to single-unit dwellings. Artists, musicians, writers, and people who prefer high ceilings and panoramic windows have moved into studios and apartments in mixed-use warehouse conversions, such as the Delavan Center and the Lincoln Building.

SU students take a stroll through Flash Park, across from the Case Complex, a former warehouse that is under development by the NWSI to house WCNY and ProLiteracy International.



A PLACE TO DO BUSINESS

The essence of urban space is a capacity for containing many functions in close proximity. A city is a place where activities bump into each other, share areas of congruence, part without fanfare, and meet again. "At one time, the Near West Side had everything people needed within walking distance—homes, schools, places to work, places to shop, things to do," Bogucz says. The Near West Side is reclaiming its urban identity on all these fronts.

The Delavan Center is a good example. A century-old factory complex where John Deere once produced the famed Syracuse Chilled Plow, it is now home to



Juan Cruz '94, artist in residence for the Near West Side, displays some of his artwork.

dozens of small businesses and, in many cases, the people who operate them. A cabinetmaker, gunsmith, and two clothing designers who hand-sew custom fashions share the West Fayette Street address with a dental laboratory, industrial valve maker, and animation studio. A few blocks away, SteriPharma LLC, a manufacturer of antibiotics, occupies a traditional industrial building it purchased from Hanford Pharmaceuticals, one of Syracuse's oldest companies, which continues to maintain a nearby site. Commercial drug manufacturing has taken place on the Near West Side continuously for more than 140 years.

Last June, the entertainment industry arrived with the opening of the 219 West

arts complex, home to two music recording studios, SubCat and Black Lagoon, and Ultimate Cut, a video production house. SubCat, the primary tenant, relocated from nearby Skaneateles, where it was founded in 2001. Its client base includes scores of Central New York musicians and bands and such international companies as Century Media and Virgin Records. The studio also hosts courses that allow SU students and area high schoolers to take advantage of 219 West's state-of-the-art facilities. The complex also contains artist housing.

Drawn by favorable costs and opportunities to shape space to their own needs, organizations are locating headquarters on the Near West Side as well:

» Syracuse Say Yes to Education has established administrative offices at the Lincoln Building, sharing the 100-year-old, 30,000-square-foot structure with residential apartments and La Casita Cultural Center, the only Latino cultural institution in Central New York. The building contains such green innovations as geothermal heating and cooling, high efficiency fixtures and appliances, and a storm-water retention system.

» The Spanish Action League of Onondaga County ("La Liga") has moved into a rehabbed street-level row development on Oswego Street.

» WCNY, the region's principal public television and radio broadcaster, and ProLiteracy International, a leading adult literacy organization, have both been re-

cruited by NWSI as tenants for the 220,000-square-foot Case Complex, a property owned and under development by NWSI. In addition to offices and studios for its four television and three radio services, WCNY will build an education center and a neighborhood café in its new headquarters, which will remain open around the clock. King & King, the project's lead architectural firm, located its Syracuse office just blocks from the site as the result of an earlier NWSI recruitment effort.

"The WCNY project signals a tremendous step forward," Higgins says. "In addition to securing commercial development of an enormous old warehouse property, we are bringing new occupants into the Near West Side who will have positive impact on the people who live there. ProLiteracy, for example, will conduct adult literacy programs in the neighborhood." The Case Complex, the Lincoln Building, and other properties—developed by NWSI with some \$7 million in grants from New York State's Restore New York Communities Initiative—are making the Near West Side into a daily destination for the Central New York workforce. "WCNY, Say Yes to Education, and ProLiteracy—those three alone—will bring about 155 people to the neighborhood every day," Jacobs says. "They will require places to eat, get haircuts, bring their dry cleaning, and so on. If people are coming to the neighborhood, people will be investing in the neighborhood."

GOING PLACES

After the Cameo Theater closed in 1960, it was 45 years before another movie was shown at a public venue on the Near West Side. The Red House Art Center broke that dark spell when it opened in 2005, and today the nonprofit arts organization presents some 500 films, plays, exhibitions, and events each year. "The Near West Side Initiative has highlighted the importance of serving our community," says Stephen Svoboda, Red House's founding executive director. "We welcome area residents to our programs, and have invited area artists, such as Tina Zagya, to exhibit in our gallery. We recently staged a theater production at St. Lucy's church." This June, Red House visitors gained an opportunity to dine at the adjacent Montage Café and Bar, a French-Asian bistro, thanks in part to a new NWSI microlending program designed to meet the needs of area small businesses.

La Casita Cultural Center, opening in the Lincoln Building this fall, is equipped with an auditorium, bilingual library, art gallery, and kitchen, and will present films, exhibitions, lectures, and performances. Its presence is a perfect fit; the Near West Side has the

largest concentration of Latino residents in Onondaga County. "La Casita is designed to build bridges through arts, culture, and education," says SU Spanish professor Inmaculada Lara-Bonilla, the La Casita program's director. "Our goal is to provide space and resources for collaborative projects involving not only Latinos and Latinas, but people of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds."

And then there is 601 Tully Street, which in addition to being a building, is the name of a studio art course, a training ground for would-be baristas, and a social space that is fundamentally non-virtual. "When I saw Home Headquarters putting houses on the market for rock-bottom prices to anyone who could afford to rehab them, I thought that well, maybe, my students and I, working with community neighbors, could redo one of them," says sculpture professor Marion Wilson, who serves as director of community initiatives in the visual arts at SU. Seeing an opportunity in Wilson's proposal for a multi-use rehabilitation, including a new business, NWSI purchased the property and turned it over to her. The result: a two-family home, which had once been a crack house, now has Café Kubal in its first floor and garden, with Wilson's sculp-

ings, scraped off the gross dirt, and used every bit of it. We designed and built all the furniture ourselves." Through an agreement with Fowler High School, students attended Wilson's class and shared the work. Now that Café Kubal is open, some Fowler students are employed part time behind the coffee bar. "Sculpture is not limited to shaping objects," Wilson says. "We shape our thinking. We shape our environment."

Wilson and the many other SU faculty members who have participated in NWSI projects are not only contributing to the neighborhood's revival, but they are using the area as a living classroom for hundreds of SU students who are learning to solve problems by creating solutions that address people's needs.

A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD?

In contrast to utopias and ghost towns, a living city is a perpetual work-in-progress. There is still plenty left to do on the Near West Side, but the tasks are beginning to seem more like opportunities than burdens or pipe dreams.

This fall, structural work begins on a storm-water management project designed by the School of Architecture's Upstate Institute. "We're going to transform Otisco Street, a main east-west route for pedestrians, bikers, and vehicles, into an entirely green street, with curb extensions at every intersection and rain gardens along the right of way," Jacobs says. Rain gardens are constructed to catch water that would otherwise go into the sewer system, retaining it under the growing surface for flowers, grasses, and vegetables. There are also plans to turn vacant lots into settings for public art and mini-parks. "Everywhere you look on the Near West Side, you see physical change, and you find that reflected in the optimism of everyone you talk to," Higgins says. "After so many years of neglect, the neighborhood needs more residents and we're attracting new people without pushing away the people who have lived there

all their lives. We're redensifying without gentrifying." Higgins believes this is made possible by NWSI's commitment to community participation at every level, including local residents who sit on the organization's "remarkably talented and diverse" board of directors. "This initiative is having impact on people," she says. "It's creating leaders as well as buildings."◀◀

Sculpture professor Marion Wilson, the major creative force behind the 601 Tully Street project, talks with Samantha Harmon '09 and Fowler High School students Parash Dhimal and Manny DeJesus about planting in the garden.



ture studio and classroom occupying the upstairs. "I've taught a course, 601 Tully: Social Sculpture, for five semesters, and that's how this building was transformed from *this*," Wilson says, pointing to photos of it in the condition she found it. "We had a very limited budget. All the materials are recycled. Students pulled beams and lifted floorboards out of old build-